

## **Emboldened Syrian Regime Steps Up Violence**

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Fears that President Assad now believes he has a free hand to crush rebellion by military force.

A newly emboldened Damascus intends to escalate its violent crackdown in the belief it is safe from western intervention, experts warn.

Opposition activists warn that events since Russia and China vetoed an already watered-down United Nations Security Council resolution on February 4 indicate that President Bashar al-Assad is determined to seek a military solution to the ten-month-old uprising.

Violence has increased since the UN vote, particularly in the western city of Homs which has been hammered by artillery and machine gun fire for nearly two weeks. As of February 9, more than 300 people had been killed in Homs, according to Human Rights Watch, and troops have also attacked the southern city of Deraa, where the uprising began last March.

"Assad has indicated to Russia that [his government] can crush the rebellion, and Russia is giving it time to do so," Malik al-Abdeh, the London-based editor-in-chief of the opposition satellite channel Barada TV, told IWPR. "It's quite obvious [Assad] believes he can crush this rebellion. He's tough enough and thick-skinned enough to survive."

Ausama Monajed, advisor to the secretary general of the Syrian National Council, the main opposition coalition based abroad, added, "Russia further alienated the Syrian people for the sake of a relationship with Assad and the regime. Syrians will always remember who supported the people and who supported the regime."

The UN resolution would have endorsed an Arab League plan for Assad to stand down ahead of elections, but a second attempt at a large-scale diplomatic move now seems unlikely.

Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS, last week, Emile Hokayem, senior fellow for regional security at the British think tank, said UN members believed the resolution had been toned down enough to win approval

"The reality is, the West, Turkey and the Gulf states did not have a back-up plan in case of a veto," Hokayem predicted that the Arab League's influence would also likely wane in the coming months, as Qatar - which has been energetic and outspoken on the Syria crisis - gives up the rotating presidency.

Although the US dismissed as "laughable" Assad's announcement this week of a referendum on a new constitution and the promise of multiparty elections, it too seems likely to remain at arms' length from the deteriorating situation.

Speaking at the same IISS event, Dana Allin, the institute's senior fellow for US foreign policy and Transatlantic affairs, said that while President Barack Obama believes in humanitarian intervention, he generally wants to end wars rather than engage in new ones. Syria is unlikely to feature large in the Republican presidential primaries.

"I've not seen a big drumbeat for intervention in Syria," Allin said, although he noted that this could change if the situation got rapidly worse.

International attention is now focusing on establishing an informal diplomatic alliance of "friends of Syria" that would continue to push for UN action at the General Assembly and Human Rights Council.

Some expect Turkey to play an important role, though it is likely to want major backing before it takes a strong stand with Syria and its supporters in Tehran. The Turkish response has so far been muted, Barada TV editor Abdeh said.

In the meantime, with Assad's assault on protestors continuing, parts of the opposition are becoming more insistent that citizens need to resort to violence themselves.

"We all know that the international community fails to protect civilians in Syria. The only way is for civilians to embrace arms," one opposition activist told IWRR on condition of anonymity.

The opposition activists said that aside from senior figures who belong to Assad's Alawite community, much of the army could defect if the safety of family members was guaranteed.

"Most of the army people are against Assad," he said. "If the army cracks, it will crack really quickly."

Government forces have been clashing with the Free Syria Army, FSA, a grouping largely made up of defecting regime soldiers. The FSA troops are lightly armed with Kalashnikovs and some rocket-propelled grenades, in contrast to the government's heavy armour and artillery. According to Abdeh, they are only organised at a local level, and lack hand-held radios with a range of over 50 kilometres.

They also lack a safe zone from which to broadcast an FM radio station like Radio Free Libya, which transmitted from Misrata.

"[The FSA] is organised on a village-by-village, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis," Abdeh said. "Trying to connect these dots together is a huge task, something the FSA hasn't been capable of doing."

Abdeh said the conflict had created a burgeoning black market for weapons. One sign of this was that prices in neighbouring states had risen steeply, with Kalashnikovs retailing for 3,000 US dollars in Lebanon and 1,600 dollars in Jordan.

"The prices keep going up because there's so much demand," he said.

According to Abdeh, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have already pledged millions of dollars, money that is likely to be channelled through tribal leaders and Muslim clerics outside Syria and spent on weapons for the rebels.

"You can call it a war by proxy but it's a natural outcome," he said, referring to the failed UN resolution.

Analysts predict that secure communications systems, bulletproof vests and night-vision goggles may also be channelled to the rebels.

Defenders of the Assad regime continue to play down the crisis.

Ammar Waqqaf, a member of the UK-based Syrian Social Club, maintained that the onslaught was less brutal it looked, adding that Russia and China could have saved tens of thousands of lives in Libya if they had used a similar veto to protect Muammar Gaddafi.

Waqqaf said that many Syrians grudgingly supported Assad, and feared that the uprising could lead to herald foreign meddling, sectarian violence and an Islamic government.

"They may not like him, but they want him still in place because that's their insurance policy against the unknown," he said. "If [Assad] stands firm... he will be perceived to have held the country together."

**William Shaw is an IWPR editor in London.**

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